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Problems Faced by the Silk Handloom Weavers in Azamgarh and Varanasi Districts of Uttar Pradesh

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ABSTRACT

Handloom weaving stands as one of the primary economic activities in India, second only to agriculture. This industry contributes approximately 15% to the nation's total fabric production and is responsible for over 95% of the global output of hand-woven cloth. According to the 4th All India Handloom Census (2019-20), the sector employs around 35.23 lakh workers, including over 26 lakh weavers and more than 8 lakh allied workers, operating across 28.20 lakh looms. This study examines the problem faced by the silk handloom weavers in the Azamgarh and Varanasi districts of Uttar Pradesh, based on primary data through a structured interview schedule. The data was evaluated using a simple percentage and presented by tables.

The research identifies several key problems impacting the handloom sector's productivity and sustainability. Among these, the high cost, poor quality, and scarcity of raw materials are significant issues. Marketing difficulties are prevalent, with 75.3% of weavers reporting challenges such as competition from power looms, inadequate promotional activities, and restricted market access due to the dominance of master weavers and cooperative heads. Financial instability is another critical concern, affecting 80% of the weavers, who struggle with poor access to funding, high-interest loans, and increasing debt. Design-related problems are also noted, with 46.7% of weavers expressing the need for greater creativity and innovation to remain competitive. Moreover, 89.4% of weavers report a lack of access to training and workshops, emphasizing the need for skill development to meet modern market demands. Technological challenges are also significant, with 82.7% of weavers lacking access to modern tools and equipment, which hampers their efficiency and output quality. Additionally, awareness of government schemes is alarmingly low, with only 27.9% of weavers informed about available support, revealing a critical communication gap.

To address these multifaceted problems, the study recommends several policy interventions. The establishment of a Raw Material Bank is proposed to ensure the availability of essential inputs for handloom weaving. The introduction of a Yarn Passbook system is suggested to subsidize yarn costs for eligible weavers. The government is also urged to provide interest-free loans or soft loans with flexible repayment terms, tailored to the specific needs and performance of the weavers. A collaborative platform that brings together silk handloom weavers and fashion designers is recommended to foster design innovation and enhance market competitiveness. Additionally, the modernization of looms and equipment, particularly those that reduce physical strain and increase productivity, is essential for the sector's sustainability. These policy recommendations aim to improve the socio-economic conditions of the weavers, strengthen their market position, and ensure the long-term viability of the handloom industry in these regions.

Keywords: Problems, Silk handloom weavers; Azamgarh district, Varanasi district; Uttar Pradesh

INTRODUCTION

India's textile industry has played a crucial role in the country's economic development, generating employment for millions and acting as a key export sector. The industry is known for its diversity, encompassing everything from traditional hand-spun and hand-woven sectors to advanced, capital-intensive mills. This industry benefits from a rich textile heritage, a skilled workforce, and a robust supply chain, all of which have positioned it competitively on the global stage (Shrivastava, 2020).

Handloom weaving is one of India's major economic activities, ranking just behind agriculture in significance. This industry accounts for about 15% of the country's total fabric production and produces over 95% of the world's hand-woven cloth (Kumar, V., et al., 2021). The handloom sector directly employs approximately 35.23 lakh people, operating around 28.20 lakh looms across the nation. The workforce consists of over 26 lakh weavers and more than 8 lakh allied workers. Uttar Pradesh has 1.31 lakh families involved in handloom weaving and related works, with 66.7% of these households living in rural and the rest 33.3% in urban, according to the 4th All India Handloom Census (2019-20).

Uttar Pradesh is unique in offering a full range of handloom products, including furniture, floor coverings, bed linens, dress materials, towels, and a variety of woven and printed cotton and silk sarees. The state's rich arts and crafts tradition makes it a promising market both domestically and internationally. Key handloom hubs include Amroha for picnic dhurries, Azamgarh for karri printing, Agra for bed linens and chenille carpets, Etawah for blended fabrics, and Varanasi for its renowned saris and brocades, among others (Uttar Pradesh Handloom Development Corporation).

The handloom sector has been a key component of the textile industry, known for its tradition of producing high-quality fabrics. However, it is confronted with several challenges, including financial limitations, insufficient technological progress, and inadequate government support, all of which seriously impede the growth and sustainability of handloom weavers and their communities (V et al., 2020). According to the working paper of the Export-Import Bank of India, the handloom sector encounters various challenges, such as raw material shortages, limited access to credit, growing competition from power looms and mills, marketing difficulties, and the industry's decentralized and unorganized structure. Additionally, poor working conditions and inadequate research and training further exacerbate these issues.

Beyond these challenges, the weavers' vulnerable social status and health problems worsen their already unstable situation, as they often lack access to crucial services and resources that could enhance their living standards and work efficiency (Renthlei, 2019). Furthermore, the handloom sector's survival is threatened not just by economic challenges but also by shifting consumer preferences and the flood of cheaper, mechanized products, which frequently result in the marginalization of traditional weavers who depend on their craft for their livelihood (Malik & Chaturvedi, 2018). The challenges that handloom weavers in India face are varied and complex, necessitating a holistic approach to resolving the core issues. Government intervention is vital through targeted policies, financial aid, and training initiatives to strengthen the weavers' skills and ensure their economic security. This support is crucial not only for safeguarding their craftsmanship, which is instrumental in preserving the nation's cultural heritage but also for making a significant contribution to the economy as a whole (V et al., 2020) (Renthlei, 2019).

Moreover, building a sense of community among weavers through cooperative societies can enable them to negotiate more effectively for fair prices and better working conditions, leading to improved socio-economic results in the sector (Malik & Chaturvedi, 2018) (Renthlei, 2019). Furthermore, improving marketing techniques and highlighting the distinct value of handloom products can draw in a wider range of consumers, which can boost demand and profitability for weavers in a competitive market (Malik & Chaturvedi, 2018).

The flagship initiative encompasses various schemes like the Revival, Reform, and Restructuring (RRR) package and the Comprehensive Handloom Development Scheme (CHDS). According to the NHDP provides marketing incentives, infrastructure support, and financial aid to promote the handloom sector. However, its impact has been limited by bureaucratic inefficiencies and the dominance of middlemen, who often absorb a significant portion of the benefits (Majeed et al., 2020). Focused on creating handloom clusters, particularly in regions like Varanasi, this program aims to provide infrastructure, skill development, and credit access. Shrivastava (2020) notes that while the initiative improved market access for weavers in certain clusters, the program failed to scale effectively due to poor coordination between stakeholders, including government bodies and private entities (Shrivastava, 2020).

LITERATURE REVIEW

Handloom weavers in Northern Kerala face several significant challenges, including difficulties in directly communicating with customers, limited access to essential information, a waning interest in the craft among younger generations, and issues related to the availability of handcrafted items. These factors collectively threaten the viability of the region's traditional handloom sector (K., Nikhilraj., Joby, Thomas., 2024). Women handloom weavers face several critical challenges, including extended working hours, inadequate incentives, low pay, and financial difficulties, underscoring the urgent need for focused support and intervention (Anupama et al., 2024).

During the COVID-19 lockdown in Odisha, handloom weavers experienced significant income loss, unemployment, and financial hardships. These challenges were exacerbated by factors such as the size of the weaving firms, levels of indebtedness, and the absence of alternative income sources (Ashish et al., 2024). Manipuri weavers face challenges like lack of literacy, government support, and counterfeit products from modern textile factories, impacting their cultural identity and livelihood sustainability in Bangladesh (Rajmoni, Singha 2024). Handloom weavers encounter several obstacles, including low essentials for overcoming these difficulties and achieving success in the sector (A., Rajyalakshmi 2024).

Handloom weavers encounter challenges such as global competition, insufficient intellectual property protection, inadequate financial support, and ineffective marketing strategies. Utilizing legal instruments like Geographical Indications can help protect their traditional knowledge and heritage (Amrita, Mishra 2022). Handloom weavers in the Rabakavi-Banhatti urban region encounter several challenges, including mismatches in marketing, issues with yarn quality, insufficient government intervention, limited financial support, international competition, and a lack of access to critical information, all of which hinder the industry's growth (Poornima, K, Naik, L., 2023). Following the COVID-19 pandemic, research highlights the need to identify and address various barriers specific to different types of weavers in Varanasi to ensure the success of the handloom industry (M.K.P., Naik., Prabhas et al., 2023). Women handloom weavers in Pollachi Taluk face several challenges, including insufficient wages, health problems, financial instability during off-seasons, difficulties in sourcing raw materials, limited access to capital, a shortage of skilled weavers, and struggles with marketing their products (S., Poongodi and P., Jayanthi., 2022).

Handloom weavers in Tamil Nadu face challenges across various areas including production, sales, marketing, and health. These issues, such as low pricing, intense competition, and outdated technologies, significantly affect their sustainability (R., Rathinamoorthy and R., Prathiba, Devi., 2021). Handloom weavers encounter difficulties including changing consumer preferences, competition from power loom products, and insufficient government support, all of which hinder their marketing efforts in the digital age (Bikash, Rath and Padmini, Panigrahi 2023). Employee engagement and work engagement can help tackle issues faced by handloom weavers, such as technological advancements, lack of modernization, and workforce migration, thereby improving overall industry performance (Surendra, Kumar. et al., 2021). Handloom weavers face several challenges, including competition from power looms, evolving consumer preferences, limited income opportunities, and the necessity for eco-friendly practices to preserve traditional craftsmanship (Sankar, Roy, Maulik 2021).

Handloom weavers encounter difficulties with sustainability and expanding their market reach. The handloom industry in India, which plays a vital role in developing the economy, needs effective solutions for sustainable development and product classification (M., V., 2022). The ergonomic assessment of handloom silk saree workers highlights potential musculoskeletal issues due to repetitive tasks, poor posture, and inadequate work environment, posing challenges to their health and well-being (K., Muthukumar., 2022). Jain's (2020) research highlights weaver families that have experienced poor living conditions and low standards of living. Specifically, the study reveals that handloom weavers of Kota Doria live under severe social and economic distress, and the various governmental programs designed to assist them have failed to significantly improve their levels of income.

Similarly, the study by Majeed et al. (2020) comprehensively analyzes the socio-economic conditions, challenges, and issues faced by the carpet industries in districts of Jammu & Kashmir and Pulwama. The findings indicate that these weavers suffer due to inadequate education, health problems, meagre wages, insufficient governmental assistance, and exploitation by intermediaries. (Roy and Chauhan, 2017) note that the handloom industry is performed by men mostly with limited education. The handloom weavers faced numerous challenges: insufficient funds to buy new machines, poor working conditions, declining wages, rising yarn prices, and lack of government support. The study emphasizes the need for effective planning and implementation of policies to ensure that the weavers can fully benefit from available resources. (Sadanandam, 2016) research examines the socio-economic conditions of weavers and proposes measures for their upliftment. The study finds that weavers face multiple challenges, including lack of capital, inability to purchase modern machinery, poor working conditions, low pay, and insufficient government support.

(Shaw, 2015) found that India's industrialization has negatively impacted the handloom weavers of Varanasi. Additionally, weavers are in dire situations due to a lack of credit and overwhelming debt. The study suggests that policymakers should allocate the necessary funds to support handloom weavers. (Prathap., and Naidu 2015) studied the socio-economic conditions of handloom weavers of Kadapa district of Andhra Pradesh. They explain the government's approach to the handloom sector includes both social and economic goals, emphasizing the need for modernization, innovation, improved productivity, and increased exports. Nevertheless, the sector continues to face significant obstacles, such as outdated technology, low efficiency, insufficient working capital, weak marketing strategies, and intense competition from power looms and mills. Despite these challenges, Indian textiles maintain a strong global presence. Historically, Mahatma Gandhi advocated for handloom weaving and spinning, seeing them as symbols of self-reliance during the independence movement. However, many handloom weavers today still endure low incomes and poor living conditions.

METHODOLOGY

To examine the problems faced by the silk handloom weavers in Azamgarh and Varanasi districts of Uttar Pradesh. A descriptive research design was utilized for this study, focusing on the challenges encountered by silk handloom weavers in the Azamgarh and Varanasi districts of Uttar Pradesh. The research relied on primary data collected through a structured interview schedule. A total of 405 respondents were surveyed, with 205 participants from the Azamgarh district and 200 from the Varanasi district. Specifically, in Azamgarh, the sample included 35 respondents from Akbarpur, 40 from Atraulia, 32 from Jahanaganj, 28 from Jeeyanpur, and 70 from Mubarakpur. Similarly, in Varanasi, the sample consisted of 60 respondents from Bajardiha, 50 from Jaitpura, 30 from Jallalipura, 30 from Lohta, and 30 from Madanpura. Out of the total 405 respondents, 90 were independent weavers selected randomly, 272 were randomly chosen weavers working under master weavers, 20 master weavers were purposively selected, and 23 were purposively selected weavers working within cooperative societies. The collected data was analyzed using simple percentage methods and presented in tabular form.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Table 1: Problem-Related to Raw Materials

<i>Districts/Problems Related to Raw Materials</i>	<i>Yes</i>	<i>No</i>	<i>Total</i>
Azamgarh	178	27	205
	-86.8	-13.2	-100
Akbarpur	31	4	35
	-88.6	-11.4	-100
Australia	36	4	40
	-90	-10	-100
Jahanaganj	28	4	32
	-87.5	-12.5	-100
Jeeyanpur	24	4	28
	-85.7	-14.3	-100
Mubarakpur	59	11	70
	-84.3	-15.7	-100
Varanasi	154	46	200
	-77	-23	-100
Bajardiha	48	12	60
	-80	-20	-100
Jaitpura	37	13	50
	-74	-26	-100
Jalalipura	23	7	30
	-76.7	-23.3	-100
Lohta	24	6	30
	-80	-20	-100
Madanpura	22	8	30
	-73.3	-26.7	-100
Total	332	73	405
	-82	-18	-100

Source: Compiled from collected data

Raw materials play a significant role in determining how much it costs to produce goods using handlooms. Yarn is the primary raw material used in handloom weaving. As a result, one of the essential requirements for the sector's growth is the availability of good yarn of good standards at a fair price. Table 1 shows that in the Azamgarh district, 178 (86.8 per cent) of weavers have a problem with raw materials and 27 (13.2 per cent) of weavers have no issue related to raw materials. In the district of Varanasi, 154 (77 per cent) of weavers have problems with raw materials, and 46 (23 per cent) have no problems with raw materials. In both districts, 332 (82 per cent) of weavers have problems with raw materials. It was observed that an increase in the price of raw materials, low quality of raw materials and scarcity of raw materials are the main problems related to raw materials.

Table 2: Problem-Related to Marketing

<i>Districts/Problem-Related to Marketing</i>	<i>Yes</i>	<i>No</i>	<i>Total</i>
Azamgarh	166	39	205
	-81	-19	-100
Akbarpur	28	7	35
	-80	-20	-100
Australia	31	9	40
	-77.5	-22.5	-100
Jahanaganj	28	4	32
	-87.5	-12.5	-100
Jeeyanpur	26	2	28
	-92.9	-7.1	-100
Mubarakpur	53	17	70
	-75.7	-24.3	-100
Varanasi	139	61	200
	-69.5	-30.5	-100
Bajardiha	41	19	60
	-68.3	-31.7	-100
Jaitpura	34	16	50
	-68	-32	-100
Jalalipura	22	8	30
	-73.3	-26.7	-100
Lohta	20	10	30
	-66.7	-33.3	-100
Madanpura	22	8	30
	-73.3	-26.7	-100
Grand Total	305	100	405
	-75.3	-24.7	-100

Source: Compiled from collected data

There are numerous barriers to a successful marketing system in this industry, including increased competition from the power loom and mill sector, lack of marketing support, lack of promotion and advertisement of handloom products etc. Table 2 shows that in the Azamgarh district, 166 (81 per cent) of weavers have a marketing problem and 39 (19 per cent) of weavers have no problem related to marketing. Of Varanasi's district, 139 (69.5 per cent) of weavers have problems with marketing, and 61 (30.5 per cent) have no marketing problems. In both districts, 305 (75.3 per cent) of weavers have problems with marketing. It was observed that an increase in competition from the power loom and mill sector, lack of marketing support, lack of promotion and advertisement of handloom products etc., are the main problems related to marketing. During the survey, it was also discovered that the marketing of the finished products is entirely controlled by the master weavers and the head of the cooperative society because they provide the raw materials and design, and they sell their final products with their name.

Table 3: Problems Related to Finance

<i>Districts/Problems Related to Finance</i>	<i>Yes</i>	<i>No</i>	<i>Total</i>
Azamgarh	170	35	205
	-82.9	-17.1	-100
Akbarpur	29	6	35
	-82.9	-17.1	-100
Australia	34	6	40
	-85	-15	-100
Jahanaganj	26	6	32

	-81.3	-18.8	-100
Jeeyanpur	23	5	28
	-82.1	-17.9	-100
Mubarakpur	58	12	70
	-82.9	-17.1	-100
Varanasi	154	46	200
	-77	-23	-100
Bajardiha	47	13	60
	-78.3	-21.7	-100
Jaitpura	40	10	50
	-80	-20	-100
Jalalipura	21	9	30
	-70	-30	-100
Lohta	23	7	30
	-76.7	-23.3	-100
Madanpura	23	7	30
	-76.7	-23.3	-100
Grand Total	324	81	405
	-80	-20	-100

Source: Compiled from collected data

Finance is a fundamental and crucial industry component. Even though the handloom sector doesn't require a lot of capital to survive, handloom units occasionally need money for raw materials and loom maintenance. Table 3 shows that in the Azamgarh district, 170 (82.9 per cent) of weavers have a problem with finance-related, and 35 (17.1 per cent) of weavers have no finance-related issues. In the district of Varanasi, 154 (77 per cent) of weavers have financial problems, and 46 (23 per cent) have no financial problems. It was found that in both districts, 324 (80 per cent) of weavers have problems related to finance. It was also observed that poor connections with funding agencies, high loan interest rates, increased indebtedness and low income compared to other professions are the main reasons for financial problems.

Table 4: Problems Related to Design

<i>Districts/Problems Related to Design</i>	<i>Yes</i>	<i>No</i>	<i>Total</i>
Azamgarh	106	99	205
	-51.7	-48.3	-100
Akbarpur	18	17	35
	-51.4	-48.6	-100
Atraulia	19	21	40
	-47.5	-52.5	-100
Jahanaganj	13	19	32
	-40.6	-59.4	-100
Jeeyanpur	18	10	28
	-64.3	-35.7	-100
Mubarakpur	38	32	70
	-54.3	-45.7	-100
Varanasi	83	117	200
	-41.5	-58.5	-100
Bajardiha	20	40	60
	-33.3	-66.7	-100
Jaitpura	24	26	50
	-48	-52	-100
Jalalipura	13	17	30

	-43.3	-56.7	-100
Lohta	14	16	30
	-46.7	-53.3	-100
Madanpura	12	18	30
	-40	-60	-100
Grand Total	189	216	405
	-46.7	-53.3	-100

Source: Compiled from collected data

Table 4 shows that in the Azamgarh district, 106 (51.7 per cent) of weavers have a problem related to design and 99 (48.3 per cent) of weavers have no issue related to design. In the district, Varanasi, 83 (41.5 per cent) of weavers have problems related to design and 117 (58.5 per cent) of weavers have no problems related to design. In both districts, 189 (46.7 per cent) of weavers have problems related to design, and 216 (53.3 per cent) of weavers have no issues related to design.

Table 5: Problems Related to Training/Workshop

<i>Districts/Problem related to Training/Workshop</i>	<i>Yes</i>	<i>No</i>	<i>Total</i>
Azamgarh	192	13	205
	-93.7	-6.3	-100
Akbarpur	33	2	35
	-94.3	-5.7	-100
Australia	38	2	40
	-95	-5	-100
Jahanaganj	29	3	32
	-90.6	-9.4	-100
Jeeyanpur	27	1	28
	-96.4	-3.6	-100
Mubarakpur	65	5	70
	-92.9	-7.1	-100
Varanasi	170	30	200
	-85	-15	-100
Bajardiha	52	8	60
	-86.7	-13.3	-100
Jaitpura	42	8	50
	-84	-16	-100
Jalalipura	24	6	30
	-80	-20	-100
Lohta	27	3	30
	-90	-10	-100
Madanpura	25	5	30
	-83.3	-16.7	-100
Grand Total	362	43	405
	-89.4	-10.6	-100

Source: Compiled from collected data

Table 5 shows that in the Azamgarh district, 192 (93.7 per cent) of weavers have a problem related to training/workshop, and 13 (6.3 per cent) of weavers have no issue related to training/workshop. In the district of Varanasi, 170 (85 per cent) of weavers have problems related to training/workshops, and 30 (15 per cent) have no issues related to training/workshops. In both districts, 362 (89.4 per cent) of weavers have problems related to training/workshops, and 43 (10.6 per cent) have no issues related to training/workshops.

Table 6: Problems Related to Technological Upgradation

<i>Districts/Problems Related to Technological Up-gradation</i>	<i>Yes</i>	<i>No</i>	<i>Total</i>
Azamgarh	170	35	205
	-82.9	-17.1	-100
Akbarpur	29	6	35
	-82.9	-17.1	-100
Australia	33	7	40
	-82.5	-17.5	-100
Jahanaganj	27	5	32
	-84.4	-15.6	-100
Jeeyanpur	22	6	28
	-78.6	-21.4	-100
Mubarakpur	59	11	70
	-84.3	-15.7	-100
Varanasi	165	35	200
	-82.5	-17.5	-100
Bajardiha	51	9	60
	-85	-15	-100
Jaitpura	41	9	50
	-82	-18	-100
Jalalipura	25	5	30
	-83.3	-16.7	-100
Lohta	24	6	30
	-80	-20	-100
Madanpura	24	6	30
	-80	-20	-100
Grand Total	335	70	405
	-82.7	-17.3	-100

Source: Compiled from collected data

Table 6 shows that in the Azamgarh district, 170 (82.9 per cent) of weavers have a problem related to technological upgradation and 35 (17.1 per cent) of weavers have no problem related to technological upgradation. In the district Varanasi, 165 (82.5 per cent) of weavers have problems related to technological upgradation, and 35 (17.5 per cent) of weavers have no problems related to technological upgradation. In both districts, 335 (82.7 per cent) of weavers have problems related to technological upgradation, and 70 (17.3 per cent) of weavers have no issues related to technological upgradation.

Table 7: Awareness of Government Schemes

<i>Districts/Awareness of Government Schemes</i>	<i>Yes</i>	<i>No</i>	<i>Total</i>
Azamgarh	55	150	205
	-26.8	-73.2	-100
Akbarpur	11	24	35
	-31.4	-68.6	-100
Atraulia	11	29	40
	-27.5	-72.5	-100
Jahanaganj	5	27	32
	-15.6	-84.4	-100
Jeeyanpur	6	22	28
	-21.4	-78.6	-100

Mubarakpur	22	48	70
	-31.4	-68.6	-100
Varanasi	58	142	200
	-29	-71	-100
Bajardiha	17	43	60
	-28.3	-71.7	-100
Jaitpura	11	39	50
	-22	-78	-100
Jalalipura	9	21	30
	-30	-70	-100
Lohta	12	18	30
	-40	-60	-100
Madanpura	9	21	30
	-30	-70	-100
Grand Total	113	292	405
	-27.9	-72.1	-100

Source: Compiled from collected data

Table 7 shows the knowledge regarding Government Schemes. In Azamgarh districts, 55 respondents (26.8 per cent) know Government Schemes, while 150 respondents (73.2 per cent) have no idea about Government Schemes. In the Varanasi district, 58 respondents (29 per cent of weavers) know Government Schemes and 142 respondents (71 per cent) have no awareness about Government Schemes. It concluded that the majority (72.1 per cent) of respondents have no awareness of Government Schemes and 27.9 per cent have knowledge about Government Schemes. The Varanasi district has slightly more awareness of government schemes than the Azamgarh district. According to the survey, most handloom weavers are less educated or never attended school. Thus, they lack awareness of government welfare schemes and cannot obtain the intended benefit from the government.

Many weavers remain unaware of the various programs designed to help them, supported by Rathinamoorthy and Devi (2021). Awareness campaigns often fail to reach the grassroots level, particularly in rural areas, where a large portion of weavers operate. This results in weavers being unable to access subsidized loans, raw materials, or technological upgrades (Rathinamoorthy & Devi, 2021). While government initiatives often emphasize the need for upgradation, practical challenges in accessing modern equipment and technology persist. Studies like those by Kumar et al. (2021) indicate that even when technology is available, weavers lack the training to use it effectively, creating a technological gap that hinders productivity (Kumar et al., 2021). As Tasneem and Abdul (2014) highlight, the weavers, particularly in rural areas, are often not well-informed due to low literacy rates and a lack of direct communication from government agencies. This communication gap means that many weavers remain unaware of the assistance they could receive. Ansari (2016) found that a significant portion of weavers depend on intermediaries or middlemen for information, which often results in a distortion of facts or selective dissemination based on the intermediaries' interests. Without proper digital or community-level channels, weavers are excluded from critical government programs. According to Mishra (2022), only a fraction of weavers benefit from these programs due to cumbersome processes and delayed fund disbursement (Mishra, 2022).

A key reason government aid does not reach weavers is the dominance of middlemen or "master weavers," who control both the production and marketing of handloom products. As Naik (2023) points out, these middlemen often exploit the weavers' lack of knowledge and claim a significant share of the benefits meant for the weavers themselves. This hierarchical control structure prevents the direct transmission of government aid to the weavers. Shaw (2015) observes that while government outreach programs such as training camps and awareness drives are conducted in some areas, they are irregular and often concentrated in urban centres, leaving out remote or rural regions. This inconsistency in outreach further alienates weavers from the very schemes intended to uplift them.

CONCLUSION AND POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

The key problems include issues with raw materials, marketing, finance, design, training, technological upgradation, and awareness of government schemes. The majority (82%) of weavers across both districts face difficulties in procuring raw materials. Problems stem from the high cost, poor quality, and scarcity of materials, impacting the productivity and sustainability of the handloom sector. About 75.3% of the weavers encounter marketing challenges, largely due to competition from power looms, lack of promotional activities, and insufficient marketing support. The control of marketing by master

weavers and cooperative heads further limits the weavers' opportunities to sell their products under their names. Financial issues affect 80% of the weavers. Challenges include poor access to funding, high interest rates on loans, increased debt, and lower income compared to other professions, which exacerbate their financial instability. Problems related to design are more varied, with 46.7% of weavers expressing concerns. There is a noticeable gap in creativity and innovation in design, which hinders the competitiveness of handloom products. A substantial 89.4% of weavers reported a lack of access to proper training and workshops. This highlights the need for regular skill development programs to enhance the weavers' capabilities and adapt to modern market demands. Technological challenges are prevalent, with 82.7% of weavers experiencing difficulties in this area. The lack of access to modern tools and technology hampers the efficiency and quality of handloom products. Awareness of government schemes is notably low, with only 27.9% of weavers informed about available support. This indicates a significant communication gap, preventing the majority of weavers from accessing potential benefits that could alleviate some of their challenges.

Based on the detailed analysis of problems faced by handloom weavers in the Azamgarh and Varanasi districts, the following policy recommendations are proposed to address these issues. The government should establish a Raw Material Bank to ensure the availability of all necessary inputs for handloom weaving, including yarn, dyes, and other materials. This bank would be responsible for the effective and timely distribution of these materials to weavers. The government should also introduce a Yarn Passbook system for all eligible weavers. This passbook would track their purchases and ensure they receive yarn at subsidized rates from government depots. Provide handloom weavers with interest-free loans or soft loans with favourable terms. These loans should be tailored to the weavers' actual needs and performance, allowing for extended repayment periods as necessary. Implement financial literacy programs to educate weavers on managing credit and loans, ensuring they make informed financial decisions. Create a government-supported platform that brings together silk handloom weavers and fashion designers. This platform would facilitate the exchange of ideas, design innovations, and market trends, enabling weavers to update their products to meet current market demands. Prioritize the modernization of looms and equipment, ensuring they are designed to minimize physical strain and maximize productivity. These recommendations aim to address the multifaceted challenges faced by handloom weavers, ensuring their well-being, improving their economic opportunities, and preserving the rich tradition of handloom weaving in these regions.

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